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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM VE
SUBJECT: REGIONAL ELECTIONS WILL TEST OPPOSITION UNITY

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FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) THE REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES FOR VENEZUELA'S AUGUST 1 GUBERNATORIAL AND MAYORAL ELECTIONS BEGAN MARCH 16. OPPOSITION GROUPS FACE THE CHALLENGE OF MAINTAINING UNITY IN THEIR EFFORTS TO REVOKE THE MANDATE OF PRESIDENT HUGO CHAVEZ WHILE COMPETING FOR THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS. OPPOSITION LEADERS HOPE TO TURN THE ELECTIONS INTO A PLEBISCITE AGAINST CHAVEZ, THOUGH IN-FIGHTING IS MAKING IT DIFFICULT TO PRESENT A BROAD FRONT AGAINST THE GOV. IF THE PRESIDENTIAL RECALL REFERENDUM GOES FORWARD IN THE SAME TIME PERIOD, THE OPPOSITION WILL HAVE A BETTER CHANCE AGAINST PRO-CHAVEZ CANDIDATES, AND VICE VERSA. END SUMMARY.

REGIONAL ELECTIONS AUGUST 1

¶2. (C) ELECTIONS FOR VENEZUELA'S GOVERNORS (23 STATES PLUS THE CARACAS FEDERAL DISTRICT MAYOR) AND MAYORS (335 MUNICIPALITIES) ARE SCHEDULED TO TAKE PLACE AUGUST 1. REGISTRATION OF CANDIDATES BEGAN MARCH 16 AND ENDS MARCH 30 (CANDIDATES MUST FILE BY MARCH 23). THE NATIONAL ELECTORAL COUNCIL (CNE) ANNOUNCED MARCH 16 THAT INCUMBENTS RUNNING FOR RE-ELECTION WOULD NOT NEED TO RESIGN THEIR POSITIONS TO CAMPAIGN, THOUGH MINISTERS OR ELECTED OFFICIALS RUNNING FOR A DIFFERENT OFFICE MUST RESIGN UPON ANNOUNCING THEIR CANDIDACIES. THE NATIONAL ELECTORAL COUNCIL (CNE) IS PRESSING FORWARD WITH THE ELECTIONS SIMULTANEOUSLY WITH THE PENDING PRESIDENTIAL RECALL REFERENDUM, WHICH THE OPPOSITION HOPES THE CNE WILL CONVENE BEFORE AUGUST.

OPPOSITION UNITY INTACT FOR NOW

¶3. (C) OPPOSITION GROUPS HAD BEEN SPLIT OVER WHETHER EVEN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS GIVEN THE CNE'S QUESTIONABLE HANDLING OF THE SIGNATURE VERIFICATION PROCESS. THE COORDINADORA DEMOCRATICA (CD) ANNOUNCED MARCH 18, HOWEVER, THAT OPPOSITION PARTIES HAD AGREED TO PARTICIPATE. THE NOTICEABLE HOLDOUTS REMAIN PROYECTO VENEZUELA (PV), HEADED BY HENRIQUE SALAS ROMER, AND PRIMERO JUSTICIA (PJ). MOVEMENT TO SOCIALISM (MAS) PRESIDENT FELIPE MUJICA TOLD POLOFF MARCH 18 HE SAW BOTH PARTIES COMING AROUND TOWARD PARTICIPATION. CAUSA R LEADER ANDRES VELASQUEZ TOLD POLOFF MARCH 19 IT WOULD NOT BE LOGICAL FOR ONLY ONE PARTY TO BOYCOTT, ESPECIALLY PJ, WHICH WOULD LOSE THE KEY MAYORSHIPS OF CHACAO AND BARUTA IN METROPOLITAN CARACAS.

¶4. (C) MUJICA SAID PUBLICLY THAT THE OPPOSITION HAS A CHANCE TO TURN THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS INTO A PLEBISCITE AGAINST THE GOV. HE NOTED, HOWEVER, THAT THE OPPOSITION WOULD NEED TO FIELD SINGLE CANDIDATES IN EACH RACE TO OPPOSE THE PRO-CHAVEZ CANDIDATE. HE SAID THE OPPOSITION IS ON THE VERGE OF MAKING A "SERIOUS ERROR" BY PERMITTING SEVERAL OPPOSITION PARTIES TO REGISTER CANDIDATES. HE SAID THAT SALAS ROMER WILL NOT COORDINATE CANDIDACIES WITH OTHER OPPOSITION PARTIES, AND PJ, TRYING TO MAINTAIN ITS IMAGE AS A NON-TRADITIONAL PARTY, HAS RESISTED COLLABORATING THE CD ON THIS POINT. HE BELIEVES PJ'S DEARTH OF CANDIDATES AROUND THE COUNTRY, HOWEVER, WILL MINIMIZE HOW THE DIFFERENCES ARE RESOLVED.

¶5. (C) VELASQUEZ SAID IT WAS "CRAZINESS" FOR OPPOSITION POLITICIANS TO ACT ON PERSONAL AMBITION WHEN PRO-CHAVEZ CANDIDATES COUNT ON AT LEAST 30 PERCENT SUPPORT NATIONWIDE. FOR THIS REASON, VELASQUEZ, WHO IS A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DEPUTY, SAID HE HAD DECIDED NOT TO RUN FOR GOVERNOR OF ANZOATEGUI OR BOLIVAR, WHERE HE SAYS HE HAS GOOD SUPPORT. MUJICA SAID THE PROBLEM OF IN-FIGHTING IS WORSE AT THE MAYORAL LEVEL, PREDICTING THAT, AT THE GUBERNATORIAL LEVEL, THE OPPOSITION WOULD WIN 18 OF 24 STATES.

OF THE CNE WAS NOT A REASONABLE EXCUSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN REGIONAL ELECTIONS. FRAUD OR MISHANDLING OF THE ELECTIONS, HE SAID, IS SOMETHING THAT THE OPPOSITION WILL HAVE TO CONFRONT IF IT OCCURS. PRIVATELY, MUJICA BELIEVES THE CNE IS COMPLETELY BIASED TOWARD THE GOV AND FURTHER DOUBTS THE CNE WILL BE ABLE TO ADMINISTER FAIR ELECTIONS. VELASQUEZ REPORTED THAT HIS SOURCES WITHIN THE CNE SAID THE ELECTORAL AUTHORITY HAD CONSIDERED POSTPONING THE ELECTIONS UNTIL DECEMBER TO ALLOW MORE PREPARATION TIME. CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS WITHIN THE INSTITUTION REFUSED BECAUSE, VELASQUEZ ASSERTS, THE GOV WANTS THE ELECTIONS TO COINCIDE WITH THE REFERENDUM WITH THE HOPE OF DISTRACTING THE ELECTORATE.

REGIONALS AND THE REFERENDUM

16. (C) BOTH MUJICA AND VELASQUEZ AGREED THAT THE OPPOSITION STILL GIVES TOP PRIORITY TO THE REFERENDUM AND IS SQUARELY UNIFIED BEHIND IT. BOTH AGREED THAT IF THE REFERENDUM DOES NOT GO FORWARD, IT WILL NEGATIVELY EFFECT THE OPPOSITION'S CHANCES IN GUBERNATORIAL AND MAYORAL RACES, ESPECIALLY IF PEOPLE BLAME THE OPPOSITION FOR THE RECALL'S DEMISE. CONVERSELY, SAID VELASQUEZ IF A REFERENDUM IS HELD AND CHAVEZ IS RECALLED, THE CNE WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO POSTPONE REGIONAL ELECTIONS UNTIL THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IS ARRANGED.

COMMENT

17. (C) THE OPPOSITION NEEDS WINS IN THE GUBERNATORIAL AND MAYORAL ARENA IF THE FIGHT WITH CHAVEZ DRAGS OUT TO 2006. WE EXPECT THE OPPOSITION POLITICAL PARTIES WILL CONTINUE TO JOCKEY FOR CANDIDACIES, WITH THE LIKELY RESULT THAT THE OPPOSITION VOTE IN SOME RACES WILL BE SPLIT TO THE CHAVISTAS' ADVANTAGE. THE GOV IS HOPING THE OPPOSITION'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS WILL LEAD TO A DECISIVE ELECTORAL BLOW AGAINST THEIR POLITICAL CAPITAL. WE ALSO SEE THE CNE'S LACK OF FAIRNESS IN THE VERIFICATION PROCESS AS A BAD OMEN FOR THE EFFICIENCY AND TRANSPARENCY OF THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS.
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